

The Sixth Sunday of Easter (5-9-2021)

Have you ever thought about how much God loved Jesus?

Think about that. Jesus is God the Son. God's own word spoken into human flesh. Jesus is God's own being, part of God's very self, embodied. And God calls Jesus the beloved. Jesus is divine love in human form. And Jesus told his disciples, *as the father has loved me, so I love you.*

Just let that sink in for a minute. That's worth meditating on for a lifetime. As God loves Jesus, so Jesus loves us. So don't ever let anyone tell you again that you are unworthy. You are beloved. And Jesus said, *Abide in my love. Abide.*

On Friday, we took a hike down to the Heceta Head lighthouse, and I don't know if any of you have ever taken it. It is not a long hike, just a mile and a half or so one way, but beautiful, beautiful old growth forest. Massive trees. As we hiked through the forest, we kept stopping in awe and wonder to look at this particularly massive tree and its unique character and shape. It was a whole forest full of them. And I thought to myself, these trees have been abiding for centuries. Soaking up sunlight and water, nutrients from the air and the ground. And in the process, becoming strong and beautiful, each one individual. Bearing the marks of the challenges they have faced over the years. But none are solitary. They are part of a community; they depend on each other and on the earth's gifts to survive and thrive.

There's recently been quite a lot of research done on communication among trees. I read a Smithsonian article called "Do Trees Talk to Each Other," and it quoted a couple of the experts in this area. One is the German forester, Peter Wohlleben, author of *The Hidden Life of Trees*. And he talked about the way that trees are connected. The hair-like root tips of the trees are connected through an underground mycorrhizal fungal network. And they use this to communicate, they share water and nutrients and chemical signals through this network. They also communicate via sense and pheromones. And Wohlleben talks about one of his favorite examples is what happens when giraffes graze on acacia trees. The acacia tree that is being grazed on sends out a danger signal through pheromones to the nearby trees and they begin pumping toxic tannins into their leaves. So they form a defense network of all the trees around.

Interestingly, the giraffes have learned about this tactic and so they will attempt to graze downwind. But they also will move from one tree to another tree about 100 feet away, which is outside the range of the communication.

Think about what a healthy system that is. It's protective so that no single network of trees gets decimated. The damage is spread out throughout the forest. Suzanne Simard at the University of British Columbia is one of the primary researchers in this area and she says we don't ask good questions about the interconnectedness of the forest because we're all trained as reductionists. We pick it apart and study one process at a time, even though we know these processes don't happen in isolation. "When I walk into a forest," she says, "I feel the spirit of the whole thing, everything working together in harmony, but we don't have a way to map or measure that. We can't even map the mycorrhizal networks. One teaspoon of forest soil contains several miles of fungal filaments."

Isn't that awesome?

And different species of trees cooperate with each other for their mutual benefit. For example, mature birch trees will send nutrients to Douglas fir seedlings that are growing in their shade. Because the seedlings can't get enough nutrients on their own, the mature tree will actually help them grow. And Simard says it doesn't make evolutionary sense for trees to behave like resource grabbing individualists. They live longest and reproduce most often in a healthy, stable forest. That's why they've evolved to help their neighbors.

And the Smithsonian article summarizes the whole thing. It says, if neighboring trees keep dying, gaps open in the protected forest canopy. With increased sunlight the trees left standing can photosynthesize more sugar and grow faster. But they're also more vulnerable and short-lived and the mycorrhizal support system weakens. In summer, if the gaps are opened, more hot sunshine reaches the delicate forest floor, heating up and drying out the cool, damp, evenly regulated microclimate that such forest trees prefer. Then damaging winds can penetrate the forest more easily. Without neighboring tree crowns to stabilize against, the chance of being uprooted increases.

Douglas firs are not planted alone. They are community trees. Think about the way that the crowns of the trees support each other in a strong wind. They are community. They are made for community.

Jesus tells us not just to abide in Jesus' love, but that this is his commandment: that we love one another as He has loved us. We are like a forest. We are mutually interdependent, made for love in community, and I think if ever anything has brought that home to us, it would be these Covid times when we have been so isolated from each other. We need each other. We need community.

And I have to say, having Curt and Ruth here -- this was not part of my written sermon - but hearing responses, and not just from my beloved husband, but multiple voices, hearing other voices singing and just the physical presence, feeds my soul. I find myself so strengthened and enriched by community. We need each other.

There's a beautiful prayer that is part of the service of Compline. *Oh God, your unfailing providence sustains the world we live in and the life we live. Watch over those both night and day who work while others sleep, and grant that we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other's toil. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Our common life depends upon each other's toil. We are a network. We feed and sustain each other.

So often society's model for us is that we are to compete. We are told that we are to get as much as we can, that it is all about how much we can acquire for ourselves and our immediate family. But what Jesus tells us is, no, it is not about competition. It's about mutual love. It's about cooperation. It's about sending nutrients to others, and finally, that this is the way we are the healthiest community. By warning each other of danger. By providing each other space to grow. By sheltering each other. We are a system of support for each other.

And we are not just a system that depends upon the human community. We are grounded in this whole world and this whole creation. We often talk about the creation as if it were something separate from us. But we are no more separate from the creation than a tree is from the earth it stands in and the air it breathes. We can't exist without it.

And so, the creation is part of what we are to love. We depend on it. Our very life depends on it. Our mutual life depends on it. Abiding in God's love means sinking our roots deep into the soil of this place where we are planted, and sharing all the goodness and beauty that we soak up. Sharing it with each other so that together we form a thriving forest. A community of mutual support. All grounded in God who loves us beyond our imagining.

Abide in God's love. And love one another as Jesus loves you. Amen.